

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 341

CS 217 299

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TITLE Writing Development. ERIC Digest D159.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-00-10
PUB DATE 2000-12-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Telephone: 800-759-4723; Web site: <http://eric.indiana.edu>.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; *Childrens Writing; Elementary Education; *Emergent Literacy; Freehand Drawing; Oral Language; Play; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest reviews children's writing development from socio-cultural, generative, and developmental perspectives. The digest's first section deals with oral language, art, and children's early writing, noting that children use their drawing and talk to support their early exploration and use of print. The second section examines how, in addition to speech and drawing, play also characterizes children's early writing development. In the third section, the digest suggests that children often use their own names for their further learning in writing. The final section discusses learning to write in the elementary school years. It considers the changes that occur in children's writing as they actively explore various forms and functions, interact with other more competent writers in their community, and develop their awareness of an audience. (Contains 24 references.) (SR)

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by Mei-Yu Lu

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Digest

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EDO-CS-00-10

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Writing Development

By Mei-Yu Lu

The purpose of this digest is to review children's writing development from socio-cultural, generative, and developmental perspectives. The development of children's writing has its roots in their social interaction with other more competent members of the society through various meaningful, purposeful activities (Haneda & Wells, 2000; Newman & Roskos, 1997). In a literate society, children are immersed in a world of print. As they grow older, children usually show an interest in writing if they have opportunities to observe other people writing and are invited to participate in literacy activities, such as making shopping lists and listening to bedtime stories (Bissex, 1980; Martens, 1996; Purcell-Gates, 1996). Gradually, children realize that both oral and written languages are purposeful and meaningful activities (Bissex, 1980; Garton & Pratt, 1998).

Oral Language, Art, and Children's Early Writing

Observational studies of children's writing development reveal that their early writing is usually accompanied by talking and drawing (Bissex, 1980; Dyson, 1988a; McLane, 1990). Children usually use their drawing and talk to support their early exploration and use of print (Dyson, 1988a). Children may initially regard writing and drawing as the direct symbol systems in which meaning is embedded (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Therefore, as children write, they weave their drawing and speech into their writing to convey meanings (Dyson, 1983; Gundlach, 1982).

Play and Writing Development

In addition to speech and drawing, play characterizes children's early writing development (Dyson & Freedman, 1991; Newman & Roskos, 1997). Vygotsky (1978) proposes that "make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language" (p. 116). Pretending serves as a bridge to literacy development (McLane and McNamee, 1990): (1) As a symbolic activity, pretend play allows children to develop and refine their capacities to use symbols, to represent experience, and to construct imaginary worlds, capacities they will draw on when they begin to write and read; (2) As an orientation or approach to experience, play can make the various roles and activities of people who read and write more meaningful and hence more accessible to young children.

Clay (1975) points out that when children explore with written language, they usually play with basic graphic features, such as the linearity of the print. In the observation of her own son's writing, Bissex (1980) found that he mentally manipulated and played with the arrangement of word strings (i.e., "You spell book B-O-O-K).

To write 'look' you just change one letter--take away the B and add an L" [p.14]) while writing a song or lying on the bed.

Children's Names: Springboard to Writing Development

Children's earliest conventional written words are usually their own names (Bloodgood, 1999; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). While children's names play an important role in expressing self identity (Garton & Pratt, 1998), they also affect children's early writing development. Research by Dyson (1983) and Liberman (1985) suggests that young children often use their names as a basis for their further learning in writing. When children are aware of some letters within their names, they will begin to use these letters in their writing (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). In addition to their own names, children use signs, captions, and labels in early writing (McLane & McNamee, 1990; Bissex, 1980). The signs, captions, and labels serve different functions. They can be used to explain and identify children's drawings (McLane, 1990), announce, assert ownership (McLane & McNamee, 1990; Bissex, 1980), and to create an imaginary world (Dyson, 1988b).

Learning to Write in the Elementary School Years

As children advance in the elementary school, their writing undergoes changes. At this stage, children may just explore and experiment with different forms of writing which focus on the mastery, competency, and control of writing (Bissex, 1980). Children might repeatedly write familiar words/phrases (Clay, 1975; Edelsky, 1986), or copy whole text/stories (Dyson & Freedman, 1991). Gradually through exploration and experimentation, coupled with writing and reading experiences at home and at school, children elaborate and refine their old forms of writing, and new forms emerge (Kamberelis, 1999).

As children's forms of writing diversify, their awareness of audience develops accordingly. In their early writing, children tend to write for an immediate or specific audience, such as their parents, relatives or friends. As new forms evolve from old forms, children apply both to achieve various purposes (Bissex, 1980).

In addition to changes in form and audience awareness, children's writing becomes more coherent and internally cohesive during the school years (Dyson & Freedman, 1991). Dyson and Freedman (1991) point out, "children become less likely to make reference outside the texts themselves (e.g., to begin texts with "This is") or to use pronouns without references (e.g., to use "He is" when who "he" "is" is not clear)." Another change appears in

children's global structure of their written text; their text becomes longer and more complex over time (Beach, 1996; Dyson & Freedman, 1991).

Studies on the development and the complexity in children's writing, especially their story writing, have shown that before children start school, most of them already understand the underlying features of storytelling (Applebee, 1978; Martens, 1996). King and Rental (1982) investigated the development of complexity in children's story writing during the first two years of schooling. They found that as children's oral skill develops, the complexity of their writing increased accordingly. With coherence and internal connectedness, the development of writing continues throughout children's school years and into adulthood.

Conclusion

Studies in children's writing development show that learning to write is a socio-cultural, generative, and developmental process. Children acquire written language as they actively explore various forms and functions. They also interact with other more competent writers in their community. Children also play with written language and weave it into activities such as drawing, speech, and play. It is through the various and rich literacy experiences that children become competent and creative members of a literate society.

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Digest #159 is EDO-CS-00-10 and was published in December 2000 by the ERIC Clearinghouse in Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th Street, Ste. 140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Telephone (812) 855-5847 or (800) 759-4723. ERIC digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. Additional copies may be ordered by contacting the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at (800) 443-3742.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.